

Higher education research policy in the UK: Class discourses and gender impacts? (0141)

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This paper explores the equality implications of contemporary UK research policy. In the context of an increasingly competitive global market, characterised by university league tables, claims of 'world class' status and assertions of research 'excellence', notions of 'selectivity' have tended to dominate the discursive field of research policy. In addition, research in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) has been prioritised over research in the arts, humanities and social sciences, reflecting an increasing emphasis on the economic utility of research findings. This focus on the actual and potential impact of research, particularly in terms of economic impact, has reinvigorated discussions of the 'pure' and 'applied' research binary and the differential valuing of these within different discursive communities. The economic recession and in particular the new Government's commitment to cut public spending by between 25% and 40% has sparked renewed competition between the learned/professional societies of different disciplinary constituencies and between competing university mission groups, as each strives to protect their own research interests.

Despite a recent proliferation of documents and statements which discuss research policy, issues of equality are notable only by their absence. My intention in this paper is to explore the implications for equality of current trends in research policy in the UK, through both a critical analysis of the dominant discourses within this policy field, and through an examination of the likely impact of these trends on staff working in higher education.

Preliminary analysis of a selection of government documents, ministerial statements and policy responses from different stakeholder organisations (e.g. university mission groups) has already been conducted and revealed the extent to which the discourse of 'excellence' and 'selectivity' dominates the field. This was apparent in *'Higher Ambitions'*, the framework for the future of higher education from the last (Labour) government which argued for 'a greater focus on world-class research and greater recognition of the potential benefits of research concentration in key areas. Excellence must remain the defining basis for allocating research funding' (BIS 2009, p. 15). A similar sentiment has been expressed by the current (Lib Dem /Conservative) Coalition Government with the Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willets (2010), saying 'I do believe in concentration on excellent research' and the current Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, Vince Cable (2010), stating that 'Research funding is already highly selective, and that is right. It will become more so.' In these examples, 'excellence' elides into 'selectivity', with demands for further concentration of research funding in 'world-class' institutions, in contrast to the ways in which assessments of 'excellence' were used in the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) to bring about some wider redistribution of available funds. I suggest that the analysis conducted to date reveals classed assumptions underpinning this discourse of 'excellence'. An example is a recent newspaper article reporting the views of the head of a Russell Group university with the heading, *'Cut student places not funding, says university chief: Protect research even if second rate colleges have to close...'* (Vasagar 2010). Drawing on previous research which has problematised apparently neutral assessments of 'merit' (e.g. Harding 2002) and work that has highlighted the ways in which universities themselves are classed (Reay, David et al. 2005), the paper will explore the ways in which symbolic systems of value work to inscribe and classify universities/research centres in terms of class, 'race' and gender. As Skeggs (2004, p. 4) notes: 'Discerning how positioning, movement and exclusion are generated through these systems of inscription, exchange and value is central to understanding how differences (and inequalities) are produced, lived and read.' A critical discourse analysis of the ways in which classed (and gendered/racialised) systems of value underpin and inform research policy will be a key focus of this paper.

The paper will also explore the likely implications of the trends towards greater research concentration and asks, 'Who benefits'? Through an analysis of HESA data on the staff composition of different universities, mission groups and disciplinary areas in terms of gender and ethnicity, it will be suggested that current trends in research policy are likely to exacerbate inequalities in the sector.

The paper will draw upon and contribute further to the body of research on the academy as a gendered and racialised field (e.g. Heward, Taylor et al. 1995; Harley 2001; Leathwood and Read 2009) to argue for the need to question research policy that disguises and legitimises inequalities in the name of research 'excellence'.

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